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ABSTRACT

The American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) Department of Standards and Practices follows a precise and detailed series of steps in its review of material presented over the network, to assure its conformity with the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters. In this process, special attention is given to programs which contain violence. Additional information is sought which would permit the network to refine the standards and criteria it applies in reviewing material intended for telecast. ABC's long-standing policy of prohibiting the use of violence for the sake of violence is continually re-emphasized to our editors and television producers. In addition, an outside program of original research was sponsored by ABC in early 1970; the guidelines for evaluation of televised violence as well as other reports which resulted from this research have been circulated to editors. It has been, and continues to be, ABC's policy to emphasize justice in the American system of law enforcement, the maintenance of order, and the solution of crimes and the apprehension of criminals, as well as to de-emphasize acts of violence. The Committee may be assured that ABC is concerned and expects to do its best to fulfill its responsibilities as a broadcaster. (SH)

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STATEMENT OF

ALFRED R. SCHNEIDER, VICE PRESIDENT

AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANY

BEFORE THE

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS

MARCH 23, 1972

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Mr. Chairman, and distinguished members of this Committee, my name is Alfred R. Schneider. I am a Vice President of the American Broadcasting Company. One of my responsibilities is to help formulate, and to implement, the American Broadcasting Company's policies and standards in relation to the acceptability of program and commercial material scheduled for broadcast over our facilities. The American Broadcasting Company's Department of Standards and Practices reports to me.

In exercising its responsibility to the viewing public, the American Broadcasting Company's Department of Broadcast Standards and Practices follows a precise and detailed series of steps in its review of material presented over the ABC Television Network, to assure its conformity with the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters as well as with the policies of the American Broadcasting Company. Before outlining these steps for this Committee, I would like to make a few general observations. In reviewing the acceptability of material for broadcast, the editor brings to bear, in the exercise of his subjective judgment, an awareness not only of the provisions of the Code, but of the time in which he lives, and its relationship

to an interpretation of the provisions he is applying.

We are living in a period of rapid change, giving rise to eruptive social forces, shifting standards of taste, conflict with our social mores and established principles, and an intense desire on the part of some groups and individuals to express their particular views. These basic changes are necessarily and properly reflected in an individual editor's evaluation of the entertainment fare he is asked to pass on.

With this general comment in mind, I would like to outline the steps taken by our editorial staff in New York and Los Angeles to review and screen material intended for broadcast over our television network, except for News, News Documentaries and Sports Events.

The Department of Broadcast Standards and Practices operates independently of the ABC Television Network so that there is, in effect, a system of "checks and balances" in determining the acceptability of program material. Thus, the ABC Television Network's Program Department's creative evaluations and considerations are kept wholly separate

and apart from the question of its acceptability for broadcast.

Editors are trained and, when experienced and competent, are given the responsibility of applying the standards to each program scheduled for broadcast. Their's is the challenging work of reviewing and commenting on material in a manner which, on the one hand, will permit and encourage genuine, artistic, and literary treatment of significant and controversial subjects which may involve adult themes while, on the other hand, will preserve the integrity of such programs and will ensure that the treatment and presentation are made in good taste on the basis of dramatic values.

Each entertainment program is reviewed by an editor in the Department of Broadcast Standards and Practices from the script stage through final production and editing. A report is prepared, often after discussion with colleagues and the supervisor in charge, indicating the acceptability of the script, or any appropriate revisions. This report is forwarded to the producer of the program. After discussion of any requested changes, revisions are

submitted by the producer to the editor, who then issues an additional script review report. The editor next reviews a rough cut of the program which affords him the opportunity to request any necessary modifications prior to issuing a final report.

The activities of the Department involve a great deal of time, daily conferences and discussion sessions between the Broadcast Standards and Practices editor and the producer, both of whom are seeking an acceptable program. The goal is to preserve creativity while enforcing the Company's standards and policies.

Under current practice, each broadcast season, prior to the commencement of production of any new program series, the American Broadcasting Company's policies and standards are reviewed with the producer of each program series and their staffs. Again this year, in late April or May, we will be meeting with the producers of each new program series to review the material to be produced for the on-coming season.

All matters relating to program acceptability are carefully

discussed and reviewed in detail. Where a particular series is expected to include portrayals of violence, extensive discussions, involving our Director of Broadcast Standards and Practices, the Director of Broadcast Standards and Practices, West Coast Division, the editor assigned to the particular program series, and me, are held with the producer to ascertain the manner in which the producer intends to relate conflict to plot development and to insure that the producer fully understands our policies and standards in this regard.

In addition to the Broadcast Standards and Practices' procedures described above, station management at all our affiliated stations, including our owned television stations, is provided with detailed information about each program prior to broadcast. Briefly, these procedures consist of the following:

(a) An advanced program advisory -- a detailed written report of the content of each regularly scheduled prime time entertainment and special program -- is prepared by an ABC program executive from the rough cut of each program. Subject to limitations of program deadlines, these reports are mailed to each

station manager seven to ten days before airtime. A duplicate report is furnished to the NAB Code Authority.

(b) Regular program previews are scheduled, via closed circuit, for our affiliated television stations located across the country. We use available closed circuit time -- approximately 8-10 hours a week at the present time -- to preview, on a rotating basis, programs in our nighttime schedule. Stations are advised in advance of the closed circuit schedule for a given month. Local station management has the prerogative of viewing these ABC programs prior to telecast either with their associates, or with anyone else they may wish to have present. In this fashion, our affiliates have an opportunity to review for themselves, the acceptability or non-acceptability of such program material prior to telecast.

(c) At annual meetings held for the management of our primary affiliated stations, program plans for the new season, beginning the following September, are presented. Affiliate management reaction to our program plans is

considered and we solicit suggestions for future programming at these meetings.

The procedures which I outlined above have been our regular practice over the years.

Since March of 1969, when the Sub-Committee on Communications last held hearings on the subject of televised violence, we have been actively seeking additional information which would permit us to refine the standards and criteria we apply in reviewing material intended for telecast. This past June we once again reminded both our editors and television producers of our policy concerning the portrayal of violence in television programs. Originally issued in June of 1968, the policy states:

"You are, of course, aware of the Company's long standing policy regarding that, in carrying out your duties in reviewing scripts, rough cuts and final prints for air, you should prohibit the use of violence for the sake of violence. While a story-line or plot development may call for the use of force -- the amount, manner of portrayal and necessity for same should be commensurate with a standard of reasonableness and with due regard for

the principle that violence, or the use of force, as an appropriate means to an end, is not to be emulated."

As the members of this Subcommittee are aware, in March of 1969, the ABC Television Network agreed to provide advance descriptive program information to the NAB Code Authority and to accord the Director of the NAB Code Authority the privilege of requesting screenings of programs prior to broadcast should he have any questions with respect to any of the material contained in the Advance Program Advisory. We have had the occasional opportunity to do so. In addition, in each year since 1969, we have prescreened the pilot program, where one exists, of every series to be included in the following year's schedule for the Code Authority Director and/or one of his representatives. After the screening, the pilot program and the anticipated direction of the series are discussed generally. The thoughts and recommendations of the NAB representative are subsequently discussed with the Standards and Practices editor in charge of the program as well as with the program producer.

In late February of 1970, Doctors Heller and Polsky and Doctor Lieberman were engaged as independent outside consultants to conduct specific research programs. In addition, several ABC executives and Doctors Heller, Polsky and Lieberman met with Dr. Eli Rubenstein, Assistant Director for the Extramural Programs and Behavioral Sciences of the National Institute of Mental Health, to inform him of the original research that was being sponsored by ABC.

In April of 1971, a reprint from the Archive of General Psychiatry of Doctors Heller and Polsky's article entitled, "Television Violence: Guidelines for Evaluation", was circulated among ABC Standards and Practices editors. These guidelines were discussed with Broadcast Standards editors, as well as with the producers and executives of the production companies preparing entertainment programs for ABC. Specifically, they were informed that the emphasis should be placed upon the consequences resulting from an act of violence and that Doctors Heller and Polsky had expressed concern over the dehumanization factor in the portrayal of violence. These matters are also referred to in the report to the Surgeon General as subjects that ought to

require the attention of those producing programs which contain violence.

Following the receipt of our first year interim report by Doctors Heller and Polsky on Television Violence and Children, and Doctor Lieberman, we circulated these interim reports to our editors for their guidance. We also made them available to producers of programs on ABC. The interim reports of our research consultants were with producers in our May 1971 meetings, prior to the production of programs for the 1971-72 season. We directed that special attention should be given in the review of materials containing portrayals of violence to that guideline which relates specifically to the imitation of acts of violence. We suggested caution be exercised in avoiding close-ups and demonstrations of criminal techniques that invite imitation.

In July of 1971 we again, along with our independent consultants, visited with Doctor Eli Rubenstein and briefed him on our interim report, seeking suggestions and maintaining a flow of information between our consultants and the Committee.

It has been, and continues to be, ABC's policy to emphasize justice in the American system of law enforcement and the maintenance of order, the solution of crimes and the apprehension of criminals. We also seek to de-emphasize acts of violence.

The depiction of violence in situations of dramatic conflict for the expression of human conflict, hostility, anger, frustration or for the portrayal of enforcement of law and order, is an appropriate subject for dramatic development. Television, no less than any other media, or art form, should be capable of dealing realistically with social and human conflicts, and, in our opinion, it is the manner in which we present and treat these subjects that is significant.

In conclusion I would like to reassure this Committee that every effort is being made and will continue to be made not only to insure that it is not the portrayal of useless excessive force for its own sake or violence that is included merely to attract an audience, but moreover as has been stated by Mr. Rule, we will continue working with our independent research consultants to seek to refine our guidelines so as to reduce the likelihood that predisposed

children will react adversely to televised violence. In those programs that do contain violence as a legitimate adjunct of plot development, the dramatic treatment should not be exaggerated or prolonged. We hope that we will be successful in limiting the portrayal of acts of violence to those instances where they are a natural and logical part of the story and where they advance dramatic development.

This Committee may be assured that we are concerned ... and expect to do our best to fulfill our responsibilities as broadcasters.

I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you and express the views of the American Broadcasting Company.